



First Corinthians

1 Corinthians 3:1-4:21: Paul and Apollos: The Meaning of "Apostle"

Paul was the founder of the Corinthian church, and Apollos apparently followed him as a leader of the church not long after. While the author of the Book of Acts undoubtedly told the story of the early church with his own biases, it seems reasonable to suppose that his description of Apollos is trustworthy. "Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John." (Acts 18:24-25)

We saw in reading 1 Corinthians 1 that the Corinthians were divided into groups based in part on the leader each group claimed for its own: "I belong to Paul. I belong to Apollos." Others say "I belong to Cephas (Peter)" and some even apparently say, "I belong to Jesus." It is unclear why exactly the Cephas party and the Jesus party (if there was one) differed from the Paul party, but we can make some guesses about those who followed Apollos. If Acts is right that Apollos was an "eloquent man" it seems quite possible that the Corinthians contrasted him with Paul, who preceded him. Paul says of himself "When I came to you brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom. . . My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom..." Any pastor who has heard reports of the astonishing success of his or her successor can sympathize with what Paul must have been feeling.

By the time our letter is written, Apollos has also left Corinth, and it may not help Paul's mood that some of the Corinthians are obviously eager to have Apollos visit again. (1 Cor 16:12)

In 1 Corinthians 3 and 4, however Paul wants to make clear that he and Apollos are joined in exactly the same task—the building up of the church.

And he wants to insist that neither of them finally is of much significance because they are "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." The self-deprecating terms—"servants," "stewards" make clear that the ones who count are Christ and God.

And yet, for all his impressive humility and collegiality, in these chapters as in all our epistle Paul wants to make clear that he has a special role in regard to the Corinthians. For one thing "Though you might have many guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed in Jesus Christ I became your father through the gospel." (4:15) Because he is their father they are called to imitate him—as the loyal child learns from imitating the behavior of a parent.

Most important, Paul is an apostle, as he insists at the beginning of this letter and all his letters, except Philippians. Though in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts the apostles are the eleven who followed Jesus through his ministry plus one appointed to replace Judas, Paul does not seem to have any particular number of apostles in mind.

Apostles are those who have seen the risen Lord and who are sent by Christ as his emissaries. The term “apostle” is a form of the Greek verb *apostellō*, and Paul wants to insist that he (like Peter and others) is sent by Jesus and that he (like Peter and others) speaks authoritatively for Jesus.

Furthermore the apostles whom the Corinthians claim to follow do not exhibit the kind of power, wisdom and boastfulness the Corinthians seem to love. Their apostleship has turned them into rubbish—an example of the foolishness that stands under and against the wisdom of the world.

From Paul’s perspective the Corinthians are making two mistakes. First of all they think that they belong to Peter or Paul, the apostles, or to Apollos who’s not really an apostle at all. (Point taken, we assume.) Second they somehow also think that they have everything they need: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich.”

Paul wants to reform (re-form) them to the proper shape of their belonging: “So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours—whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you. And you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.”